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ABSTRACT

An approach to English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) teaching that helps students prepare for intercultural communication is described, drawing on the literature of second language learning and intercultural communication. First, potential barriers to intercultural understanding are examined, including the culture-bound nature of communication, language differences, misinterpretation of nonverbal cues, and preconceptions and tendency to evaluate. Communicating in English is particularly difficult for some because of the complexity and unfamiliarity of its conventions. Seven sociolinguistic concepts that can facilitate intercultural understanding are enumerated and their application to classroom teaching is discussed briefly. A review of current approaches to the teaching of sociolinguistic concepts follows, including academic, observational, media-based, experiential, and cognitive approaches. Finally, a method for integrating these concepts through a variety of activities for EFL learners is suggested. Contains 30 references. (MSE)

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TEACHING EFL LEARNERS SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONCEPTS FOR INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that in most cases interactions are miscommunications. This proposition is immediately clear if we envision the two interactants are from two widely different cultures, because as Samovar et al. (1981) put it, "cultural variance in how people encode and decode messages is the foremost problem in intercultural communication."

Misunderstanding in intercultural communication occurs mainly because either one or both interactants adopt misconceptions about, or are simply ignorant of cultural patterns of their interlocutors (Barna 1991). This type of communication barrier, that generally stems from cultural-perceptual differences, can be lowered, among other things, by knowledge and understanding of cultural factors that are subject to variance (Samovar et al. 1981).

This paper will (1) elaborate on potential barriers that can hamper intercultural understanding, (2) discuss sociolinguistic-cultural concepts that can facilitate intercultural understanding, (3) examine current approaches to the teaching of sociolinguistic-cultural concepts for intercultural understanding, and (4) propose a suggested method for teaching sociolinguistic-cultural concepts to EFL learners.

2. Cross-cultural "danger zones"

Culture and communication are inseparable and reciprocal: it is through influence of culture one learns to communicate, and it is through communication the culture is perpetuated.

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Communication is therefore cultural. As cultures are different from one another, the communication practices and behaviors of individuals in those cultures is in large part unrealized, and unconscious (Samovar et al. 1981; Mc Groarty & Galvan 1985; Wolfson 1989).

Unawareness of this culturally-bound nature of communication patterns can lead one to a wrong assumption that people perceive life and communicate their experience and ideas in the same way across cultures. This misconception can in turn result in inaccurate encoding and wrong interpretation of messages in intercultural communication, such as in the case of sociolinguistic or pragmatic transfer (Wolfson 1989).

Some other problem areas, that constitute stumbling blocks, are language differences, nonverbal misinterpretation, and wrong sociolinguistic attitudes -- preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate, and high anxiety (Barna 1991).

For EFL learners, communicating in English is difficult not only because the language has its own vocabulary, syntax, idioms, slangs, dialects, but it also has complex conventions which are in most cases different from the language of their native cultures (Richards & Sukwiwat 1985; Pennycook 1985; Lono 1987). Parallel to this, Peter Strevens (in Smith 1987:172) contends that "every society has roles and customs about personal behavior while the individual is speaking or listening to others."

In fact, to EFL learners, every bit of linguistic as well as non-linguistic components of communication is potentially problematic because every word and expression in language use has a cultural dimension (Steele 1990), which is in most cases unstated (McGroarty & Galvan 1985; Wolfson 1989).

Everyone is a culture bearer (McGroarty & Galvan 1985). As such he perceives his environment (material/physical, social, psychological/ideological) and makes sense of what goes on

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around him using conceptual bases (e.g., myths, truisms, stereotypes) from his native culture. These perceptual sets, especially stereotypes and preconceptions, can hamper full intercultural understanding because they interfere with objective viewing of stimuli (or inputs) by selectively perceiving only those pieces of information that correspond to preexisting "pictures in his head" (Samovar et al. 1981). For example, to quote Barna (1991), "An Asian or African visitor who is accustomed to privation and the values of self-denial and self-help cannot fail to experience American culture as materialistic and wasteful."

Perception and culture, as indicated above, are inseparable. When one receives stimuli (verbal or otherwise), one will automatically give response in some way in light of one's unique background. One would feel one's patterned response as the appropriate, normal, and right way. This bias can prevent the open-minded attention needed to see the attitudes and behavior patterns from other people's viewpoint.

This tendency to judge, to approve or disapprove actions and statements of other people without trying to go beyond one's own culturally-bound perceptual sets can cause misunderstanding. For instance, an American host might judge his Korean guests a bunch of slobs simply because he saw the guests slurp very strongly the soup he served them. His bad feeling about those well-meaning Korean would automatically turn to appreciation if he knew that slurping was meant to be a compliment for the delicious soup (Wolfson 1988).

Communication in foreign language (and culture) is a stressful business. It is immediately evident if we consider the fact that behavior is ambiguous; the same action can carry different messages in different settings (Stewart cited in Barna 1991). This uncertainty of what to say (or do) or not to do (or say) and what will happen in consequence creates tension and stress. This condition further distracts concentration ("internal

noise"), making mistakes and misunderstanding even more likely.

Knowing the presence of possible stumbling blocks enables one to make informed expectations and to avoid them. In order to better overcome those potential intercultural communication barriers, systematic-elaborate efforts to study sociolinguistic or/ cultural concepts, e.g., through classroom instruction, are in order.

3. Sociolinguistic concepts and cross-cultural understanding

As indicated in preceding paragraphs, in addition to conventions of language use which different from those with which EFL learners are familiar, their unpreparedness toward cultural variability in general constitutes a major problem that can hamper full inter-cultural understanding. In other words, unless the EFL learners have mastered the necessary and attitudes as their communication resources and strategies, it is unlikely that EFL learners can achieve full intercultural understanding.

Jan Gaston (1984) suggests that intercultural understanding is a resultant of a four-stage cultural assimilation-learning process marked with essential skills of non-judgmental observation, coping with ambiguity, empathizing, respect or intercultural competence EFL learners should be able to function appropriately within a society of the target language and to communicate with the culture bearer.

More specifically, Seelye (1988: 48-59) proposes seven essential socio-cultural concepts that should be included in a sociolinguistic instruction in order to develop in the learners the following intercultural skills.

(1) ... understanding that people act the way they do because they are using options the society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs;

(2) ... understanding that such a variable as age, sex, social class, and place of residence affect the way people speak and behave;
(3) ... understanding of the role convention plays in shaping behavior by demonstrating how people act in common mundane and crisis situations in the target culture;
(4) ... an awareness that culturally conditioned images are associated with even the most common target words and phrases;
(5) ... the ability to evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture in terms of the amount of avoidance substantiating the statement;
(6) ... the skills needed to locate and organize information about the target culture from the library, the mass media, people, and personal observation;
(7) ... intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy toward its people

Using those seven cultural concepts as a framework, we can expose students to sociolinguistic facts and social conventions governing the use of the English language as elaborated below

With respect to skills # 1 and 2 : students are introduced to the fact that the English language varies along with speakers' variable --their regional origin, social class, gender, and age -- and communi-cative events and situations of language use, that dictate certain appropriate linguistic styles and registers (Finegan & Besnier 1989, Wardhaugh 1976)

Skill # 3: students are familiarized with sociocultural conventions that govern verbal and paraverbal communicative behavior of the natives of the target culture. For instance, how they use forms of address, how they express apologies, requests, disapprovals, refusals, gratitudes, greetings, and partings along with their paraverbal components (Wolfson 1989). At a discoursal level, students need also be exposed to

conversational routines in a variety of situations and other pragmatic rules (Richards & Sukwiwat 1985, Tannen 1983)

Skill # 4 : students are made aware of nuances of word and sentence meanings, and a variety of meanings: referential, social, and affective meanings (Finegan & Besnier 1989)

Skill # 5 : students are given opportunities to examine stereotypes and misconceptions that they might have or ever heard about the natives of the target culture, to practice making, evaluating, and refining generalities concerning the target culture and its bearers, etc

Skill # 6 : students are familiarized with techniques for and are given opportunities to do researching the target culture through reliable sources, such as the library, the mass media, people, and personal experience and observations

Skill # 7 : students are encouraged and facilitated in doing further independent reading about and making contact with people from the target culture

In sum, the instruction of sociolinguistic and intercultural concepts must be directed toward the development in the learning individuals the knowledge that there are several equally appropriate ways of doing things, and the way people feel, think, behave and speak is shaped by their culture through its unique history and social conventions, all of which manifest themselves in the linguistic system and conventions of language use; skills to enable the EFL learners to cope with cultural variations with empathy and respect, and further refine their understanding and skills throughout their lifetime ("learning to learn"), and favorable attitudes, especially in the form of intellectual curiosity about and feeling of empathy toward the target culture and its bearer.

4. Approaches to teaching sociolinguistic concepts

Ideally, we learn sociolinguistic rules of a target culture in the same way we learn about our own native culture: by

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constantly interacting directly with the native culture bearers whose language is being studied. However, this ideal method is impractical and even almost impossible for EFL learners (Bhawuk 1990). In search for possible alternatives, experts have approached the teaching of sociolinguistic and cultural concepts from different philosophical strands, resulting in a variety of approaches. Among the commonly used approaches are academic approach, observational approach, media approach, experiential approach, and cognitive approach (McGroarty & Galvan 1985, Bhawuk 1990, Albert & Triandis 1991).

(1) Academic Approach

This approach, which is also termed "university model" (Bhawuk 1990), emphasizes informational aspect of learning. Underlying this approach is a belief that a foreign culture can be learned in a classroom through formal instruction. Classroom techniques that are commonly used in this approach are lectures and reading assignments on the target culture (McGroarty & Galvan 1985). Potentially, this approach can provide the students with wide range of information on various topics of intercultural communication and sociolinguistic concepts.

As reflected in its techniques, this approach requires learners to process sociolinguistic-(inter)cultural concepts mostly at the cognitive level. According to Harrison & Hopkins, as cited in Bhuwak (1990), academic approach has the following weaknesses (a) students tend not to learn to develop their own network for collecting information and about the target culture/language because the necessary information has been neatly provided by experts or textbooks; (b) emphasizing solving well-defined problems using well-developed methods, this approach does not encourage students to find a workable solution as demanded by a particular contexts to find a workable solution as demanded by a particular context of needs; (c) processing issues rationally without emotional involvement,

this approach does not give the chance for the students to develop "emotional muscles", which are essential for emotional resilience needed by "intercultural persons"; (d) this approach tends to evaluate cognitive knowledge rather than sociolinguistic awareness and intercultural skills, and (e) its classroom procedures tend to demand more mastery of written communication rather than oral proficiency, whereas in the actual intercultural encounter one normally needs more speaking skills along with a good sense of nonverbal communication and active listening.

(2) Observational Approach

This approach is based on the assumption that one can learn another culture by observing the way people in the target culture behave, and by sensitizing self-awareness -- by knowing one's own culture better, one can understand one's own attribution that will enable self adjustment and suspension of judgement when interacting with people from the target culture. The teaching learning procedures that are commonly used here are observations (personal as well as by the aid of a native informant), discussion, and role-playing (Bhawuk 1990, McGroart & Galvan 1985).

(3) Media Approach

Media approach is based on the notion that media (e.g. television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.) are the "mirror of society" (Stein 1972). Media reflect and describe the existing conditions of the culture -- both cultural facts (e.g., literature, art, music, and other forms of expressions of creative aspiration of the natives) as well as cultural acts: the use of verbal and nonverbal components of communications in a socioculturally appropriate way (Steele 1990).

Using audio and/or visual "cultural documentaries" as a point of departure, teachers can have the class engaged in discussions

on relevant intercultural topics and enhance their understanding of the concepts. This data-based topic of discussion can add an important dimension to the cultural-concepts teaching-learning process (McGroarty & Galvan 1985)

(4) Experiential Approach

Underlying this approach is the assumption that the only way to learn culture is through experiencing it in a structured way, either in a real-life situation or its simulated form (Bhawuk 1990; Kim 1991)

Unlike academic approach that stresses cognitive learning and intellectual processing of informational content of the target cultures, experiential approach emphasizes affective learning and doing (Bhawuk 1990)

Classroom techniques that are commonly used here are role-playing, simulation games, and cross-cultural exercises (McGroarty & Galvan 1985)

(5) Cognitive Approach

Based on "work in cognitive psychology which seeks to provide a rational basis for choice among alternative behaviors" (McGroarty & Galvan 1985), this approach emphasizes information on cultural acts as well as cultural facts that one can find in the target culture. Four techniques are commonly used here: culture assimilators, culture capsules, culturgrams, and culture asides.

A. Culture Assimilator

Cultural assimilator consists of a set of short descriptions of situations (in the target culture) that require learners to choose the correct response among potentially reasonable ways of resolving problem situation; learners are then provided with feedback from the perspective of the natives of the culture (McGroarty & Galvan 1985; Seelye 1988)

These techniques are interesting to read, actively involving learners with intercultural problems, effective, and they can help participants understand why choices which seem acceptable to them are not always appropriate in a cross-cultural situation (McGroarty & Galvan 1985, Sellve 1988)

B. Culture Capsule

It is a paragraph or so of explanation of one minimal difference between two cultures, along with several illustrative photos or relevant realia to demonstrate the difference (Seelve 1988; McGroarty & Galvan 1985)

C. Culturgram

It is a set of concise and simplified descriptions of major aspects of target cultures

D. Culture Aside

It is an activity in the form of spontaneous responses to intercultural aspects of interest that arise in the classroom, and brief comments made on them

From the discussion in this section, it is clear that there are a number of possible approaches to teaching sociolinguistic and cultural concepts to EFL learners. Each approach puts more emphasis on certain aspects of learning over the other, resulting in variance in their relative strengths and weaknesses

5. Conclusions and suggestions

As suggested in preceding sections, the sociolinguistic or cultural-concept instruction should enable EFL learners to become competent intercultural persons. This presupposes, on the learners' part, the possession of the knowledge, functional, skills, and favorable attitudes needed to communicate with people from English-speaking countries with empathy and

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respect, and from time to time refine and adjust their understanding as the cultures change over time.

Given this objective, any approach or method that stresses only certain aspects of learning over the other will not work well. In other words, what is needed is a "method" that simultaneously takes care of learners' cognition, affect, and behavior.

Since there is "no one way to tech culture" (Steele 1990), some eclecticism should be in order. A word of caution, however, must be strongly emphasized here, that satisfactory achievement of learning-teaching objectives is the only justification for this "mixture of methods" (or eclecticism).

In view of the nature of cultural learning which is developmental, a multiple-activities method (Gebhard 1990) coupled with "PIC-integrated" techniques (Gudykuns et al. cited in Bhawuk 1990) might be worth proposing as an alternative.

Using these two "methods", we can construct the following rough framework for teaching EFL students sociolinguis.ic concepts for intercultural understanding.

First, sociolinguistic concepts as cultural information can be taught using " academic" and "experiential" models, with main objectives of "pulling out" the subconscious cultural awareness and transform it to the intellectual level of cultural awareness. This can serve as a basis for ensuing step, that is sensitizing learners to cultural differences.

Second, sociolinguistic concepts as intercultural skills can be introduced to learners through "observational" and "media" method, where the EFL learners have the opportunity to observe how the natives of the target language behave. Students then compare their new understanding with their pre-existing conceptions about the target as well as native cultures and discuss them with knowledgeable resource persons.

Third, internalization of concepts and fostering intercultural attribution and research skills through multiple activities in a variety of contexts. This can be conducted using various techniques from "cognitive", "observational", and "media" approaches.

Using this multiple-activities method as a guiding principle in organizing course contents and classroom procedures, sociolinguis-tic and (inter) cultural concepts instructions could be expected to embrace all the essential components of intercultural competencies: awareness, understanding and ability to cope with cultural differences using an investigative approach (rather than preconcep-tions and stereotypes), and feeling of empathy for and intellectual curiosity about the natives of the target culture as a result of comprehensive understanding of the nature of cultural-linguistic relativity and human equality.

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